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Conversation With Kenneth Anger

SHELLEY BURTON

Kenneth Anger, whose films are currently being shown at the Cinematheque 16, is a practioner of the occult, a student of magic, admitted sadist, a brilliant film maker, and the man responsible more than any other for starting the new underground film art movement in this country with his activity as producer, director, actor and cameraman. His SCORPIO RISING was the first underground film to make inroads and breakthroughs into the commercial market and be treated as the work of an artist rather than a novelty. In addition, he was among the first of the underground film makers to be given respectful nods from the establishment; he has already won a Ford Grant, among others.

I had occasion to spend some time with Anger while I was covering the 1966 San Francisco Film Festival. In his apartment over one of San Francisco's art film theatres, we spoke in a room where blood red velvet covered all the walls and ceiling. Artifacts of sadism, varied homosexual and heterosexual pornography, magic instruments, holy scriptures of the Black Arts, Tarot Cards and other metaphysical bric-a-brac fill the small temple, leaving one with the impression that one has suddenly been transported to Houdini's Fire Island shrine.

Anger's works represent the jewels of the avant garde film chest. His first professionally released film was FIREWORKS, showing a young boy's homosexual dream and the sadistic fantasy of muscle men sailors who intimidate and beat him with chains. It was made in his home when Anger was in his late teens while his parents were away on a three-day weekend vacation. He finished filming with stolen Navy stock film which was donated by one of the sailors.

Anger's extensive knowledge of music and his immense ability to use it permeates his subject matter; Stravinsky's "Fireworks" creates the sonic thunder necessary to mount Anger's stormy visual images. Bach and Vivaldi are harmonized to the magnificently grotesque and brilliantly resplendent images in the later film, THE INAUGURATION OF THE PLEASURE DOME.

SCORPIO RISING has impressed me as being the most powerful film on the motorcycle milieu. It has the seriousness and intensity Warhol is incapable of, fused with the clarity and succinctness Brakhage has yet to achieve. Exhibiting his usual chromatic clairvoyance and editing brilliance, Anger has synchronized pop music sounds to the film's visual rhythms.

The opening scenes show a cycle-junkie-jockey turning a wrench in his machine's colon area, and the sound track blares out "A wind-up doll, I'm your wind-up doll." An effeminate cyclist puts on his jeans, blue form-fitting shirt, jeweled cycle jacket, and we hear a male vocalist sing "Blue Velvet." We are taken into a James Dean impersonator apartment, shown the necrophelic knick-knacks and serenaded with a "Face Like An Angel."

In conversation as well as in films, Anger equates idolatry, sexuality and violence with a homogeneous hedonism. In SCORPIO, a lone cycle pack leader wanders down a dark alley; inter-cut to church film on Christ leading his apostles down a dirt road; music blares the rock-spiritual, "He's My Guy." The pack settles in a loft for an orgy; cut to the Last Supper; Pack leader gets on bike and leaves; cut to Christ being helped on donkey. During the orgy sequence, a young man is being homosexually raped to the tune of "Torture, Torture, Baby You're Torturing Me."

The only pretty female image in all of SCORPIO is a bikini-clad manikin in a wax museum. I had to see it a second time to realize it was a wax figure, this token heterosexuality being that briefly on display. Newsreel footage of Hitler and stormtroopers are inter-cut with the cyclist pack activities. The comparison between bike, military and police helmets is visually well established.

The creativity of the "Underground" film style is superbly achieved in the final death scene of SCORPIO. Closeup of a police car with spinning red light; closeup of boy lying on dark road in agony; closeup of cycle helmet, closeup of tatoo on young boy's arm. Three or our brief images created and photographed with imagination, thrift and accomplishment and it was all Anger. He did not need a motion picture studio to industralize his art. Whether or not he needed the film industry art to inspire or teach him is a whole other article.

Anger grew up in Hollywood around the studio lots. While the film hippy may think it is tremendously effective for him to insert a shot of Mickey Rooney as Puck in the Brando WILD ONE footage in SCORPIO, it is probably autobiographical rather than satirical; Anger was a child actor in that 1935 Warner's version of "Midsummer Night's Dream."

Anger directed his first home movie when he was eleven. Little was heard of his directorial talents until FIREWORKS. Then followed SCORPIO RISING; INAUGURATION OF THE PLEASURE DOME; PUCE WOMAN (two years in the making and never completed); and EAUX d'ARTIFICE, a runaway film production shot in Italy, with its gowned court figure running with graceful violence through some of the most beautiful fountains in Europe. The last is shot in a variance of blue hues and shows Cocteau's influence on Anger; for a brief time Anger was a student and protege of Cocteau's.

In one of our meetings he screened for me the first five minutes of the uncompleted KUSTOM KAR KOMMANDOS I found it to be the most gracefully mounted of Anger erotica. It deals entirely with two young hot rod fanatics trying to masturbate their gleaming vehicle; close up of boy's head (cranium) in chromed motor section, camera tracks backward, boy straightens up, two huge chrome carburetors appear in bottom of frame just below boy's abdominal area.

Our conversation ranged from Comic strip art (comic strip inserts appear in SCORPIO) to Alistair Crowley, the mystic, pornographic painter and recluse who has been a major influence on Anger's life.

Anger made a number of comments:

The Warren Report: "programmed cackle."

Vietnam: "The Establishment's way of masturbating young boys' violence."

America: "It will never be anything but a lonely sad land, crying out in the wilderness. Its culture will not take root because it is dancing on the graves of Indian nations it has robbed, raped and plundered. Their magic is stronger than the white man's, and we are paying a terrible price for our sacrilege."

San Francisco: "The place where the western world will crack open, the place where the tides meet, the space tides."

The complete retrospective of his work is now showing at the Cinematheque 16 Theatre in Hollywood. It will be playing for one more week. It represents the career of an important underground film maker.

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